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ABSTRACT

Based on school visitation in Leflore County, Mississippi, interviews with first- and second-grade teachers, school social workers, and members of the central staff, the writer discusses the need for pre-school education in that county and evaluates the school program it relates to pre-school education. It is recommended that Project Head Start should resume operation, that nursery and kindergarten education be instituted in Leflore County, and that a course of study for the rural disadvantaged young children be prepared. This work was prepared in 1969 under funds from Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. (AN)

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Early Childhood Education

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Early Childhood Education in Leflore County

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The schools of Leflore County, Mississippi are fortunate to have had the foresight of the present Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education in planning the consolidation of many small schools into nine(9)larger units with modern facilities. They are to be commended in providing full-time librar - ians and principals in the elementary schools. It is hoped the part-time secretarial help may be expanded. In this way the principal may be relieved of many administrative details and more time can be spent in supervision and the improvement of instruction.

The Board and the Superintendent are to be commended in being alert to the availability of federal funds and their follow-up in program planning. The Instructional Center and the staff of consultants are tributes to their zeal and continued effort in behalf of the children of Leflore County. The fine professional spirit and morale of all persons with whom I came in contact recommend the philosophy and procedures of the leadership group. The problems stem from social and economic conditions.

I visited with staff at the Instructional Center, spent short periods of time in five(5) elementary schools, sat in on a conference on teacher education, and had a meeting with the principals and teachers in the Follow Through program. Miss Elzy and Mr. Crain drove me about the county and I was able to gather much information from our conversations enroute to schools. It is difficult to make completely accurate observations based on a short two-day visit. On the other hand an experienced school-person gathers many impressions from a tour of a building and conversations and contacts with those housed there.

There is no question in my mind that a good program of early childhood education would effect dramatic changes in the school achievement of the children of Leflore County. Much research provides evidence that early stimulation of the

child's intellectual faculties results in gains not attainable at any other age. Curiosity and the urge to learn become deadened, the child becomes unperceptive of the world about him and lacks the means of communicating about that with which he must deal with in order to survive.

There is considerable evidence that the project Headstart Program that functioned in Leflore County for two(2)years and the Migrant Education Program of the past summer for 5 year olds paid big dividends.

1. Between children who have had and those who lacked pre-school experience, teachers and visitors in the classroom observe differences in:

   ability to verbalize

   alertness

   independence

   size of vocabulary and clarity of concepts

   self-concepts

   interest and enthusiasm for school experiences

   ability to listen and follow directions

   cleanliness and personal appearance

   attendance at school.

2. Parents are asking for a return of the former Head Start Program for their younger children.
3. A large majority of the present retainees were not in pre-school programs.
4. Children with pre-school experiences make more rapid progress in first grade.
5. Parents who were involved in the early(now discontinued)Headstart Program are more cooperative with the school and have better attitudes toward the school staff and program.
6. Teachers are pleading for full year pre-school programs for <u>all</u> children

A number of elements of the school situation as I observed it, would make a big contribution to the implementation of a program in early childhood education. These should be recognized and encouraged:

1. All members of the staff whom I contacted were very open to new ideas, from the superintendent down.
2. The staff has a fine professional attitude-eager to learn, knowledgeable of their pupils, concerned about the total school program, and willing to go beyond the tasks required of them.
3. All elementary schools have libraries with full-time librarians.
4. There is a plentiful supply of varied instructional materials and equipment.
5. The use of teacher aids is being introduced in some classrooms.
6. The daily delivery service from the Instructional Center insures the availability of materials that are distributed from central storage.
7. There is a close working relationship between the Leflore County Schools and the state colleges and universities in the area.
8. Student teachers are found in many classrooms.
9. Home Economics and Industrial Arts Programs for the Junior High are provided in the same building in which elementary school children are housed.
10. The services of school and public health nurses are available to the teachers.
11. School social workers have been introduced in the Follow Through Program.
12. The Instructional Center is well staffed with consultant help and resource personnel including a Federal Projects Director.
13. Each elementary school has a full-time principal.
14. Relationships between the pupils and the staff and between staff and principal indicate the humaness of the professionals.
15. Many opportunities for teacher growth are provided by the central administration.
16. The Instructional Center and the school buildings are modern and functional.

These conditions, it seems to me, would create an environment that would foster the development of a new program directed at providing experiences for young children that would enrich their backgrounds and bring about changes in the homes that might eventually eliminate the paucity of opportunities to learn and achieve. There seems to be many resources available. The problem is to obtain

sufficient money to harness the resources into a workable plan. Everything points to the present as a propitious time for Leflore County to initiate a program of nursery and kindergarten education supplemented by an adult program for the parents of the young children in such classes.

However, on the basis of my observations, there seem to be certain elements of the school situation that should be studied and questioned, if change is to be effected and the instructional program improved. A program in early childhood education for 4-and 5-year olds must be a part of the total elementary school program, each year building on the experiences and the achievements of each individual child for the preceding year. The philosophy of the elementary school must not be in conflict with that of the nursery and kindergarten. A planned organized program need not be a formal one. If children learn in the early years through exploration and discovery, manipulation and construction, concrete and first hand experiences before abstraction, these same methods should be pursued in subsequent years. Although our research on learning is limited, what we have points definitely to the success of pupil-directed learning over memorization and abstraction in the development of interest and understanding of the content of learning.

I therefore suggest that the following observations made by me in my classroom visitation should be studied and their accuracy determined. If the conditions that I list are present, they will restrict the success of a child-development based nursery and kindergarten educational program.

1. There is a lack of general elementary supervision.
2. Secretarial service is limited. This puts a burden on the principal and he is not able to provide the instructional help a teacher needs.
3. The pupils engage in a profusion of paper and pencil work and abstractions in the first grade.
4. The instruction is not differentiated within the classroom - all children were working on the same ditto sheets.

5. Classrooms had a formal arrangement of furniture, generally with no interest or stuffy centers, no homey informal gathering spot.
6. There is little evidence of art activities - paintings, modeling, etc.
7. Very little individual and small group teaching in the classrooms was evident.
8. The teacher-pupil ratio is higher than that recommended.
9. The methods of evaluation and reporting progress to parents do not recognize individual differences in children.
10. There is no check-up on the school census; many children do not enter school until they are past 6 years of age.
11. The teacher does not utilize the services of the second teacher and the teacher aid as effectively as is possible.
12. Although there is a good supply of instructional materials, it is not used effectively nor purposefully by the pupils or the teachers.
13. There is no available space for kindergarten and nursery school classes nor for reducing the size of the classes.
14. There is a lack of picture books and informal teaching-learning centers in the classrooms.
15. The first grade program is much too sedentary.
16. There is seemingly a lack of county-wide curriculum study among teachers.
17. Few classrooms had growing plants and living animals.

These conditions would not foster an informal, child-directed learning program for young children. Adequate facilities, equipment and materials, and teachers who understand the individual differences among children and how learning takes place are basic to a good nursery and kindergarten program. Young children learn by doing, by questioning, through expression in action and language. They need to develop a good self concept, have their needs for security, love, acceptance, and to be wanted fulfilled. They blossom in a place where they are free to try out their new-found abilities; where it is acceptable to make mistakes; where the limits are known and guidance is given to live with-

in these. Teachers are the facilitators, the stage setters. There is no one single curriculum or lesson for all to master; a book or a sheaf of papers to complete.

To secure for Leflore County children the kind of educational program that they need, there seems to be three areas for concentration of effort: community relations, over-all school organization and program, and additional programs for young children. I shall present each of these, with proposals.

Community Relations

No school can really achieve its potential until the community and the school function cooperatively, respecting and supporting each other in their individual and joint efforts. There seems to be need in Leflore County for the white and the black people to gain a better understanding of each other. Where they are working side by side in the schools there is respect and appreciation for individual talents and limitations. The response to the "freedom of choice" policy in school enrollment and the willingness of professionals to volunteer toward the integration of school staffs indicate this understanding and appreciation present at the central staff level is not present at the school level. A program of public or community relations might help to break down this lack of communication, since each side would learn more about the other group and so discover common aspirations and achievements.

The first step would be the appointment of someone to give direction to such a program; someone who is knowledgeable in the use of mass media, respected by the community or able to inspire such respect when beginning to work with them, acquainted with public education and the schools in Leflore County, and a confirmed optimist.

A first activity might be a survey of community resources. No doubt there are persons in leadership position in the community who are sympathetic to the need for breaking down class and color barriers. The school children should have ample opportunities to be seen learning about the community. One principal remarked to me that many of the children in his white school had never seen a cotton gin in operation. What about trips to the cotton fields to observe the

defoliation of the cotton plants, the machine-picking, the planting, the cultivation - with a teacher who points out, explains, raises questions? Similar field trips to a cattle farm, a food market, a fire station, a post office, the town hall with a teacher making this an educational experience rather than a walk -through would provide the finest kind of first-hand learning in addition to bringing to the community an awareness of the school program and the pupils in the school. Few of even the most hardened adults can resist the smiles and enthusiasm of young children, bent on learning.

Those members of the community who have skills that they are willing to share with the schools would be identified in the survey and invited to come to the school to show their slides, talk with the pupils on their hobbies, serve as helpers on field trips, tell stories, serve as volunteer aids in the classroom, the library or the school health clinic. When the school reaches out to the community, it becomes easier for those in the community to reach out to the school. By joining efforts, much can be accomplished.

Another part of the community relations program might be the extension of the use of the school facilities by the community. Boy and girl scout troops might use the school for their meetings. The library should be open beyond the regular school hours providing story hours on Saturdays and in the summer; as well as book circulation. Or if the schools are so situated that they cannot be reached on foot or transportation cannot be provided, the library should be taken to the homes with a bookmobile. People cannot be encouraged to read if there is nothing available to read, as is true in many homes. Schools that serve the needs of a community are supported by the community.

Home visitation serves two purposes. It gives the school a picture of how the pupils spend the time out of school and also some of the problems both the children and parents confront. Instruction and demands can be adjusted, and behavior can be better understood. The home and school are the learners' world. The child is often caught between the two because of the lack of communication between

the two. The face-to-face contacts of home visitations are exceedingly remunerative to all.

Another means of entrance into the home is through the television picture tube. If the means could be found to initiate a short 5 - 10 minute daily spot on the local television program when some phase of the school program could be presented, the community through this daily confrontation would become informed and appreciative of what the school administration and teachers are doing for the children. Since most stations allot a certain part of their air time for public service, the costs for such a program might be cut to production only. And the professional staff and the children could be the "actors."

The final phase of the community relations program that I shall suggest is the use of the community service clubs in Greenwood and comparable areas. Most of these clubs have adopted the national program which includes education, under the direction of an education committee. They are often seeking projects of a meaningful nature. Men and women who join such clubs are community-minded and oriented to giving service. They therefore furnish a wonderful resource to a school community relations director. Other groups to be tapped might be college clubs, university women, church groups, the Junior League and women's clubs in nearby towns.

Black and white working together to solve common problems is an essential to any program of school improvement. Some means must be found to bring an understanding of each for the other and how all can benefit in the same community. Leadership must be exerted to this end.

Over-all School Program and Organization

So much has happened so fast there is a need for tightening up in certain areas. There comes a time when there must be a stock-taking and a filling-in of gaps. The most serious gap seems to me to be the lack of a statement on the philosophy, goals or objectives, and policies on the selection and use of instructional materials. This is where I think general supervision could make a big contribution. If the principals were relieved of the minutiae of administration and had the qualifications

to provide general supervision in the elementary school they could very well fill this need. The staff needs to talk-out its beliefs, what it sees as the task of the elementary school, and how the goals can be reached. This would provide direction and a structure within which new programs, plans, materials and equipment would be accepted and implemented.

The consultant help available from the Instructional Center could service and provide advice to the school staff in developing the program best suited to the children and family served by the school. There would be a totality to the curriculum, each phase supplementing and supporting all other elements. The teacher would not be caught up in the problem of trying to respond to the enthusiasm of individual consultants developing programs in their varied subject fields.

The development of a school philosophy would probably bring the staff to an appreciation of the vast differences among those attending the schools. The goals would no doubt recognize these differences and highlight the need for programs that would be concerned with more than academic achievement. Broader goals would point out the need for more realistic ways of evaluating progress. After all if there are vast differences in the talents and limitations of the pupils, the measurement of all children against a standard arrived at by averaging out all, is really not very realistic. A report card that utilizes a symbol to determine how close an individual meets the standard set for all does not help either that child nor his parents to know why he succeeded or failed nor what he can do to come closer to the standard. Individuals must be taught as individuals and must in turn be evaluated in terms of their unique capacities. A study of reporting practices and evaluation of progress by staff would enrich the teachers' understanding of child development, learning and teaching, as well as becoming acquainted with new means of diagnosing learning problems and using evaluative instruments for constructive purposes.

An extension of a staff study of educational objectives, philosophy,

evaluation and reporting might be a continuing county-wide program of instructional improvement at the school level. Several days of released time, when the children are not in school but teachers report for study and work together, might be written into the contracts of all teachers with appropriate remuneration. Or early dismissal of children might be arranged periodically to provide time for such county-wide inservice education. The state colleges in the area might be interested in providing consultant help and arrangements might even be made to allot professional or academic credit for such work. Teachers should be involved in the selection of areas for study.

A county-wide program to study phases of the curriculum leading to the production of curriculum guides should be initiated immediately. The teachers need direction in teaching. Goals in each subject area, sequence and scope of study, appropriate experiences and materials, suggested techniques and procedures should be included. The present "Course of Study for Language Arts" is an excellent start. This county-wide study of the curriculum could be the means of coordinating the continuing in-service education opportunities provided in the individual schools. Teachers giving leadership would be invited to continue work during the vacation months, with pay. The summer program would also include workshops for all teachers, extending over several days just before the school opening, and made a part of the teachers' contract period. Workshop offerings should be practical. Teachers could be assisted in: putting individual assignments on tape for use at listening posts; making instructional materials that could be used for individualizing instruction; art media; learning how to use new equipment, tools and materials.

The school census seems to be a procedure without any teeth since the State of Mississippi has no compulsory school attendance law. This is a great weakness. Children who are not in school cannot benefit from its offerings. A check-up by school social workers of those families not send-

ing school-age children to classes would no doubt result in a decrease of those not registering. Research is providing evidence that the lack of intellectual stimulation in the beginning years of life leaves gaps in development that are extremely difficult to fill in later years. Too many children are entering Leflore County schools after they are 6 years of age. Some means must be found to get children into school.

Instructional Programs for Young Children

Instructional programs for 3-, 4-, and 5-year olds will provide for the deep-seated needs of young children whose homes lack the stimulation provided by animated conversations, story telling, reading, and educational materials, trips and play. Although the initiation of early childhood education programs is my basic proposal, its success will be limited if not accompanied by those recommendations previously listed. Good kindergarten and nursery education is only one part of the total education spectrum, which is a continuum from nursery through college. Programs for young children cannot take their proper place and make their potential contribution unless there is a common philosophy at every level of development, and the staff works as a team building on what has been done earlier. Evidence to support the proposal for the establishment of full year classes for the 3-, 4-, and 5-year olds was presented earlier. The national emphasis on funding of Project Head Start shows the importance the Federal agencies place on beginning education early. The rapidity with which this can be done in Leflore County is dependent on the committment to the idea and the availability of funds that can be used in initiating the program. No stone should be left unturned to accomplish this goal.

The program for young children has 3 facets - health, education and welfare. No one of these elements can be neglected. Public health facilities and services must be utilized in the diagnosis and correction of physical and health needs. Social services are essential in meeting family problems, providing adequate housing, food and clothing. It may be necessary for the school to supplement with free lunches. Pre-school round-ups in the spring

or early summer are helpful in determining and preparing to meet the needs of those registering for early childhood education programs.

An adjunct of the program for young children would be learning experiences for the parents and involvement of them in carrying out the program. The child's needs are the same at home as at school. Parents must be helped to understand these needs and be given the know-how of meeting them. Home visitation and adult educational offerings that relate to the practical problems of daily existence are pieces of the experiences made available to parents. However, there is no substitute for actual parent participation in the school experiences provided for their children. This may take many forms, but is most successful when the parent agrees to contribute at regular intervals some block of time for work with or for the school.

Mothers may be aids in the classroom, accompany children on field trips, meet in groups to learn some skill such as sewing and then make something that is needed by the children. They may meet with a professional to learn how children grow and develop and how essential care in the home is, to attaining their potential. Often the professional arranges directed observations of the children of these parents. Leadership among the mothers can be identified and these more capable ones can even be used as home visitors to interpret the school. Fathers can be taught simple skills with the hammer and saw and helped to make or repair things for the school. There may even be some fathers who have work skills that may be shared - teach the children how to prepare the soil for planting, how to sow seeds and cultivate a small garden plot on the school grounds.

Thus the self concept of the adult is being improved, the child sees his father and mother as valued persons, and father and mother are learning the importance of the adult working with the child and how to relate effectively to children. As parents and adults work with school professionals both gain an appreciation of the other and, as was pointed out earlier, this results in better cooperation of the parents with the school.

Many community services should be used in a program of parent education and involvement: Public Health, School Social Workers, Home Demonstration Agents, and Family Service and the American Red Cross.

Probably the most crucial element of a good kindergarten and nursery education program is the teacher. Pre and in-service educational programs should be planned jointly by the County school and the State colleges. The teacher of young children must have a thorough grounding in child development; know how to individualize instruction, and how to keep anecdotal and cumulative records on each child's behavior and progress; be familiar with and skilled in using a variety of instructional materials; know how to work with adults-his co-workers, parents, aides, and consultant personnel. In addition to providing for the adequate preparation of teachers and continuous on-the-job growth, the kindergarten and nursery school teacher needs the guidance and support of supervisory service, available on a continuing basis.

There never seems to be sufficient help for the teacher of young children. This is especially true when the children come from disadvantaged homes where there has been little attention given the child. He is dependent, non-verbal, limited in interests, and often afraid. He needs the attention that comes from a one-to-one contact. He needs to be literally bombarded with language. The teacher finds herself inadequate in meeting the demands of 20 or 30 such children. The class size must be small. Most authorities suggest 1 adult to every 5 children. Mothers are used extensively, but it has been found that adolescents can be most effective. Of course, any aide must participate in a thorough training program, as well as the fully prepared teacher who will provide the leadership. Each must know how to work as a team; how the non-professional can supplement and aid the professional and how the professional can guide her assistants and utilize most effectively their services.

The presence of the Junior-High age pupils in the elementary schools offers a wonderful resource to the teacher of young children. Skills learned in home economics and industrial arts would be practiced in making articles needed in the classes for young children or used to demonstrate and help the little ones learn to use tools of sewing, cooking and wood-working. Courses in Family Life Education and Psychology might use the nursery and kindergarten classes for observation and practice posts. As the adolescents would be learning more about young children and preparing to be knowledgeable parents, they would be providing help to the teacher. Individual children would have the stimulation and gain the security that comes from a one-to-one relationship with an older person. Such resources might be supplemented by using members of the Future Teachers Association in the local High Schools as aids in the classroom.

To initiate nursery and kindergarten education in Leflore County it is recommended that work be started immediately on the preparation of a course of study for the young child. This would present objectives, materials and experiences, techniques, timing, room arrangement, evaluation, and parent relations. Although each teacher would plan her program to fit the needs of the children in her group, there should be common elements in the programs being offered throughout the county.

It is also suggested that pilot classes be set up to try out the curriculum, materials, and different uses of aids, techniques and procedures. These pilot classes would also serve as observation posts and practice centers for the colleges engaged in the preparation of teachers of young children.

The experiences from Project Head Start and the summer migrant education program provide for Leflore County a start in early childhood education. The success of these projects should lend encouragement to their extension. The need is great. The road blocks may seem insurmountable. But the will to do, the openness of school leadership to attempt new things, the fine professional spirit of all the staff whom I contacted, and the know-how of the Instructional Center

Staff suggest that Leflore County Schools will meet their problems and will provide ways of getting good education for the children.